

VARYING VIEWPOINTS

Whose Revolution?

Historians once assumed that the Revolution was just another chapter in the unfolding story of human liberty—an important way station on a divinely ordained pathway toward moral perfection in human affairs. This approach, often labeled the “Whig view of history,” was best expressed in George Bancroft’s ten-volume *History of the United States of America*, published between the 1830s and 1870s.

By the end of the nineteenth century, a group of historians known as the “imperial school” challenged Bancroft, arguing that the Revolution was best understood not as the fulfillment of national destiny, but as a constitutional conflict within the British Empire. For historians like George Beer, Charles Andrews, and Lawrence Gipson, the Revolution was the product of a collision between two different views of empire. While the Americans were moving steadily toward more self-government, Britain increasingly tightened its grip, threatening a stranglehold that eventually led to wrenching revolution.

By the early twentieth century, these approaches were challenged by the so-called progressive historians, who argued that neither divine destiny nor constitutional quibbles had much to do with the Revolution. Rather, the Revolution stemmed from deep-seated class tensions within American society that, once released by revolt, produced a truly transformed social order. Living themselves in a reform age when entrenched economic interests cowered under heavy attack, progressive historians like Carl Becker insisted that the Revolution was not just about “home rule” within the British Empire, but also about “who should rule at home” in America, the upper or lower classes. J. Franklin Jameson took Becker’s analysis one step further in his influential *The American Revolution Considered as a Social Movement* (1926). He claimed that the Revolution not only grew out of intense struggles between social groups, but also inspired many ordinary Americans to seek greater economic and political power, fundamentally democratizing society in its wake.

In the 1950s the progressive historians fell out of favor as the political climate became more conservative. Interpretations of the American Revolution as a class struggle did not play well in a country obsessed with the spread of communism, and in its place arose the so-called consensus view. Historians such as Robert Brown and Edmund Morgan downplayed the role of class conflict in the Revolutionary era, but emphasized that colonists of all ranks shared a commitment to certain fundamental political principles of self-government. The unifying power of ideas was now back in fashion almost a hundred years after Bancroft.

Since the 1950s two broad interpretations have contended with each other and perpetuated the controversy over whether political ideals or economic and social realities were most responsible for the Revolution. The first, articulated most prominently by Bernard Bailyn, has emphasized ideological and psychological factors. Focusing on the power of ideas to foment revolution, Bailyn argued that the colonists, incited by their reading of seventeenth-century and early-eighteenth-century English political theorists, grew extraordinarily (perhaps even exaggeratedly) suspicious of any attempts to tighten the imperial reins on the colonies. When confronted with new taxes and commercial regulations, these hypersensitive colonists screamed “conspiracy against liberty” and “corrupt ministerial plot.” In time they took up armed insurrection in defense of their intellectual commitment to liberty.

A second school of historians, writing during the 1960s and 1970s and inspired by the social movements of that turbulent era, revived the progressive interpretation of the Revolution. Gary Nash, in *The Urban Crucible* (1979), and Edward Countryman, in *A People in Revolution* (1981), pointed to the increasing social and economic divisions among Americans in both the urban seaports and the isolated countryside in the years leading up to the Revolution. Attacks by laborers on political

elites and expressions of resentment toward wealth were taken as evidence of a society that was breeding revolutionary change from within, quite aside from British provocations. While the concerns of the progressive historians echo in these socioeconomic interpretations of the Revolution, the neoprogres-sives have been more careful not to reduce the issues simplistically to the one-ring arena of economic self-interest. Instead, they have argued that the varying material circumstances of American participants led them to hold distinctive versions of republicanism, giving the Revolution a less unified and more complex ideological underpinning than the idealistic historians had previously suggested. The dialogue between proponents of "ideas" and "interests" has gradually led to a more nuanced meeting of the two views.

Most recently, scholars have taken a more trans-Atlantic view of the Revolution's origins, asking when and how colonists shifted from identifying as "British" to viewing themselves as "American." Fred Anderson has argued that long before rebellion, the Seven Years' War (1754–1763) helped create a sense of American identity, apart from Britain. Other historians such as T. H. Breen, argue that British nationalism actually intensified in the colonies over the course of the eighteenth century, as economic and cultural ties between Britain and North America strengthened through increased trade and the migration of ideas with the growth of print culture. Only when colonists realized that the British did not see them as equal imperial citizens, entitled to the same rights as Englishmen, did American nationalism emerge and Americans rebel.

Chronology

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| <p>1774 First Continental Congress calls for abolition of slave trade</p> <p>1775 Philadelphia Quakers found world's first antislavery society</p> <p>1776 New Jersey constitution temporarily gives women the vote</p> <p>1777 Articles of Confederation adopted by Second Continental Congress</p> <p>1780 Massachusetts adopts first constitution drafted in convention and ratified by popular vote</p> <p>1781 Articles of Confederation put into effect</p> | <p>1783 Military officers form Society of the Cincinnati</p> <p>1785 Land Ordinance of 1785</p> <p>1786 Virginia Statute for Religious Freedom
Shays's Rebellion
Meeting of five states to discuss revision of the Articles of Confederation</p> <p>1787 Northwest Ordinance
Constitutional Convention in Philadelphia</p> <p>1788 Ratification by nine states guarantees a new government under the Constitution</p> |
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The Constitution: Revolutionary or Counterrevolutionary?

Although the Constitution has endured over two centuries as the basis of American government, historians have differed sharply over how to interpret its origins and meaning. The so-called Nationalist School of historians, writing in the late nineteenth century, viewed the Constitution as the logical culmination of the Revolution and, more generally, as a crucial step in the God-given progress of Anglo-Saxon peoples. As described in John Fiske's *The Critical Period of American History* (1888), the young nation, buffeted by foreign threats and growing internal chaos, with only a weak central government to lean on, was saved by the adoption of a more rigorous Constitution, the ultimate fulfillment of republican ideals.

By the early twentieth century, however, the progressive historians had turned a more critical eye to the Constitution. Having observed the Supreme Court of their own day repeatedly overrule legislation designed to better social conditions for the masses, they began to view the original document as an instrument created by elite conservatives to wrest political power away from the common people. For historians like Carl Becker and Charles Beard, the Constitution was part of the Revolutionary struggle between the lower classes (small farmers, debtors, and laborers) and the upper classes (merchants, financiers, and manufacturers).

Beard's *An Economic Interpretation of the Constitution of the United States* (1913) argued that

the Articles of Confederation had protected debtors and small property owners and displeased wealthy elites heavily invested in trade, the public debt, and the promotion of manufacturing. Only a stronger, more centralized government could protect their extensive property interests. Reviewing the economic holdings of the Founding Fathers, Beard determined that most of those men were indeed deeply involved in investments that would increase in value under the Constitution. In effect, Beard argued, the Constitution represented a successful attempt by conservative elites to buttress their own economic supremacy at the expense of less fortunate Americans. He further contended that the Constitution was ratified by default, because the people most disadvantaged by the new government did not possess the property qualifications needed to vote—more evidence of the class conflict underlying the struggle between the federalists and the antifederalists.

Beard's economic interpretation of the Constitution held sway through the 1940s. Historians like Merrill Jensen elaborated Beard's analysis by arguing that the 1780s were not in fact mired in chaos, but rather were hopeful times for many Americans. In the 1950s, however, this analysis fell victim to the attacks of the "consensus" historians, who sought explanations for the Constitution in factors other than class interest. Scholars such as Robert Brown and Forrest McDonald convincingly disputed Beard's evidence about delegates' property ownership and refuted his portrayal of the masses as propertyless and disfran-

chised. They argued that the Constitution derived from an emerging consensus that the country needed a stronger central government.

Scholars since the 1950s have searched for new ways to understand the origins of the Constitution. The most influential work has been Gordon Wood's *Creation of the American Republic* (1969). Wood interpreted the ratification controversy as a struggle to define the true essence of republicanism. Antifederalists so feared human inclination toward corruption that they shuddered at the prospect of putting powerful political weapons in the hands of a central government. They saw small governments susceptible to local control as the only safeguard against tyranny. The federalists, on the other hand, believed that a strong, balanced national government would rein in selfish human instincts and channel them toward the pursuit of the common good. Alarmed by the indulgences of the state governments, the federalists, James Madison in particular (especially in *Federalist* No. 10), developed the novel ideal of an "extensive republic," a polity that would achieve stability by virtue of its great size and diversity. This conception challenged the conventional wisdom that a republic could survive only if it extended over a small area with a homogeneous population. In this sense, Wood argued, the Constitution represented a bold experiment—the fulfillment, rather than the repudiation, of the most advanced ideas of the Revolutionary era—even though it emanated from traditional elites determined to curtail dangerous disruptions to the social order.

Chronology

- 793 Whitney's cotton gin transforms southern economy
- 800 Gabriel slave rebellion in Virginia
- 808 Congress outlaws slave trade
- 817 American Colonization Society formed
- 820 Missouri Compromise
- 822 Vesey slave rebellion in Charleston, South Carolina
Republic of Liberia established in Africa
- 829 Walker publishes *Appeal to the Colored Citizens of the World*
- 831 Nat Turner slave rebellion in Virginia
Garrison begins publishing *The Liberator*
- 831-832 Virginia legislature debates slavery and emancipation
- 1833 British abolish slavery in West Indies
American Anti-Slavery Society founded
- 1834 Abolitionist students expelled from Lane Theological Seminary
- 1835 U.S. Post Office orders destruction of abolitionist mail
"Broadcloth Mob" attacks Garrison
- 1836 House of Representatives passes "Gag Resolution"
- 1837 Mob kills abolitionist Lovejoy in Alton, Illinois
- 1839 Weld publishes *American Slavery as It Is*
- 1845 Douglass publishes *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass*
- 1848 Free Soil party organized

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What Was the True Nature of Slavery?

By the early twentieth century, the predictable accounts of slavery written by partisans of the North or South had receded in favor of a romantic vision of the Old South conveyed through popular literature, myth, and, increasingly, scholarship. That vision was persuasively validated by the publication of Ulrich Bonnell Phillips's landmark study, *American Negro Slavery* (1918). Phillips made three key arguments. First, he claimed that slavery was a dying economic institution, unprofitable to the slaveowner and an obstacle to the economic development of the South as a whole. Second, he contended that slavery was a rather benign institution and that the planters, contrary to abolitionist charges of ruthless exploitation, treated their chattels with kindly paternalism. Third, he reflected the dominant racial attitudes of his time in his belief that blacks were inferior and

submissive by nature and did not abhor the institution that enslaved them.

For nearly a century, historians have debated these assertions, sometimes heatedly. More sophisticated economic analysis has refuted Phillips's claim that slavery would have withered away without a war. Economic historians have demonstrated that slavery was a viable, profitable, expanding economic system and that slaves constituted a worthwhile investment for their owners. The price of a prime field hand rose dramatically, even in the 1850s.

No such definitive conclusion has yet been reached in the disputes over slave treatment. Beginning in the late 1950s, historians came increasingly to emphasize the harshness of the slave system. One study, Stanley Elkins's *Slavery* (1959), went so far as to compare the "peculiar institution" to the Nazi

Northern opposition to slavery
State Act 1850

Bleeding Kansas
Proslavery/Slaveholder

Debates
yes

concentration camps of World War II. Both were “total institutions,” Elkins contended, which “infantilized” their victims.

More recently, scholars such as Eugene Genovese have moved beyond debating whether slavery was kind or cruel. Without diminishing the deprivations and pains of slavery, Genovese has conceded that slavery embraced a strange form of paternalism, a system that reflected not the benevolence of southern slaveholders, but their need to control and coax work out of their reluctant and often recalcitrant “investments.” Furthermore, within this paternalist system, black slaves were able to make reciprocal demands of their white owners and to protect a “cultural space” of their own in which family and religion particularly could flourish. The crowning paradox of slaveholder paternalism was that in treating their property more humanely, slaveowners implicitly recognized the humanity of their slaves and thereby subverted the racist underpinnings upon which their slave society existed.

The revised conceptions of the master-slave relationship also spilled over into the debate about slave personality. Elkins accepted Phillips's portrait of the slave as a childlike “Sambo” but saw it as a consequence of slavery rather than a congenital attribute of African Americans. Kenneth Stampp, rejecting the Sambo stereotype, stressed the frequency and variety of slave resistance, both mild and militant. A third view, imaginatively documented in the work of Lawrence Levine, argues that the Sambo character was an act, an image that slaves used to confound their masters without incurring punishment. Levine's *Black Culture and Black Consciousness* (1977) shares with books by John Blassingame and Herbert Gutman an emphasis on the tenacity with which slaves maintained their own culture and kin relations, despite the hardships of bondage. Most recently, historians have attempted to avoid the polarity of repression versus autonomy. They assert the debasing

oppression of slavery, while also acknowledging slaves' ability to resist the dehumanizing effects of enslavement. The challenge before historians today is to capture the vibrancy of slave culture and its legacy for African American society after emancipation, without diminishing the brutality of life under the southern slave regime.

A new sensitivity to gender, spurred by the growing field of women's history, has also expanded the horizons of slavery studies. Historians such as Elizabeth Fox-Genovese, Jacqueline Jones, and Catherine Clinton have focused on the ways in which slavery differed for men and women, both slaves and slaveholders. Enslaved black women, for example, had the unique task of negotiating an identity out of their dual responsibilities as plantation laborer, even sometimes caretaker of white women and children, and anchor of the black family. By tracing the interconnectedness of race and gender in the American South, these historians have also shown how slavery shaped conceptions of masculinity and femininity within southern society, further distinguishing its culture from that of the North.

Scholarship on slavery continues to grow. The newest work by Philip D. Morgan and Ira Berlin has drawn attention to how both the institution of slavery and the experience of the enslaved changed over time. They contend that slavery was far from monolithic. Rather it adapted to particular geographic and environmental factors, which influenced the diet and work routines of slaves and shaped the degree of autonomy in family life and culture that slaves were able to carve out. Slavery also changed from one generation to the next. As southern slaveholders responded to new social and economic conditions, they gradually altered the legal status of slaves, making slavery a hereditary condition, outlawing manumission in many places, rendering freedom for the enslaved increasingly difficult to attain, and placing onerous restrictions on the work opportunities and mobility of free African Americans.

Chronology

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| <p>1852 Harriet Beecher Stowe publishes <i>Uncle Tom's Cabin</i></p> <p>1854 Kansas-Nebraska Act
Republican party forms</p> <p>1856 Buchanan defeats Frémont and Fillmore for presidency
Sumner beaten by Brooks in Senate chamber
Brown's Pottawatomie Massacre</p> <p>1856–1860 Civil war in “bleeding Kansas”</p> <p>1857 <i>Dred Scott</i> decision
Lecompton Constitution rejected</p> | <p>1857 Panic of 1857
Tariff of 1857
Hinton R. Helper publishes <i>The Impending Crisis of the South</i></p> <p>1858 Lincoln-Douglas debates</p> <p>1859 Brown raids Harpers Ferry</p> <p>1860 Lincoln wins four-way race for presidency
South Carolina secedes from the Union
Crittenden Compromise fails</p> <p>1861 Seven seceding states form
Confederate States of America</p> |
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The Civil War: Repressible or Irrepressible?

Few topics have generated as much controversy among American historians as the causes of the Civil War. The very names employed to describe the conflict—notably “Civil War” or “War Between the States” or even “War for Southern Independence”—reveal much about the various authors’ points of view. Interpretations of the great conflict have naturally differed according to section and have been charged with both emotional and moral fervor. Yet despite long and keen interest in the origins of the conflict, the causes of the Civil War remain as passionately debated today as they were a century ago.

The so-called Nationalist School of the late nineteenth century, typified in the work of historian James Ford Rhodes, claimed that slavery caused the Civil War. Defending the necessity and inevitability of the war, these northern-oriented historians credited the conflict with ending slavery and preserving the Union. But in the early twentieth century, progressive historians, led by Charles and Mary Beard, presented a more skeptical interpretation. The Beards argued that the war was not fought over slavery per se, but rather was

a deeply rooted economic struggle between an industrial North and an agricultural South. Anointing the Civil War the “Second American Revolution,” the Beards claimed that the war precipitated vast changes in American class relations and shifted the political balance of power by magnifying the influence of business magnates and industrialists while destroying the plantation aristocracy of the South.

Shaken by the disappointing results of World War I, a new wave of historians argued that the Civil War, too, had actually been a big mistake. Rejecting the nationalist interpretation that the clash was inevitable, James G. Randall and Avery Craven asserted that the war had been a “repressible conflict.” Neither slavery nor the economic differences between North and South were sufficient causes for war. Instead Craven and others attributed the bloody confrontation to the breakdown of political institutions, the passion of overzealous reformers, and the ineptitude of a blundering generation of political leaders.

Following the Second World War, however, a neonationalist view regained authority, echoing the

earlier views of Rhodes in depicting the Civil War as an unavoidable conflict between two societies, one slave and one free. For Allan Nevins and David M. Potter, irreconcilable differences in morality, politics, culture, social values, and economies increasingly eroded the ties between the sections and inexorably set the United States on the road to Civil War.

Eric Foner and Eugene Genovese have emphasized each section's nearly paranoid fear that the survival of its distinctive way of life was threatened by the expansion of the other section. In *Free Soil, Free Labor, Free Men* (1970), Foner emphasized that most northerners detested slavery not because it enslaved blacks, but because its existence—and particularly its rapid extension—threatened the position of free white laborers. This “free labor ideology” increasingly became the foundation stone upon which the North claimed its superiority over the South. Eugene Genovese has argued that the South felt similarly endangered. Convinced that the southern labor system was more humane than the northern factory system, southerners saw northern designs to destroy their way of life lurking at every turn—and every territorial battle.

Some historians have placed party politics at the center of their explanations for the war. For them, no event was more consequential than the breakdown of

the Jacksonian party system. When the slavery issue tore apart both the Democratic and the Whig parties, the last ligaments binding the nation together were snapped, and the war inevitably came.

More recently, historians of the “Ethnocultural School,” especially Michael Holt, have acknowledged the significance of the collapse of the established parties, but have offered a different analysis of how that breakdown led to war. They note that the two great national parties before the 1850s focused attention on issues such as the tariff, banking, and internal improvements, thereby muting sectional differences over slavery. According to this argument, the erosion of the traditional party system is blamed not on growing differences over slavery, but on a temporary *consensus* between the two parties in the 1850s on almost all national issues *other than* slavery. In this peculiar political atmosphere, the slavery issue rose to the fore, encouraging the emergence of Republicans in the North and secessionists in the South. In the absence of regular, national, two-party conflict over economic issues, purely regional parties (like the Republicans) coalesced. They identified their opponents not simply as competitors for power but as threats to their way of life, even to the life of the Republic itself.

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Was the West Really “Won”?

For more than half a century, the Turner thesis dominated historical writing about the West. In his famous essay of 1893, “The Significance of the Frontier in American History,” historian Frederick Jackson Turner argued that the frontier experience molded both region and nation. Not only the West, Turner insisted, but the national character had been uniquely shaped by the westward movement. Pioneers had brought the raw West into the embrace of civilization. And the struggle to overcome the hazards of the western wilderness—including distance, deserts, drought, and Indians—had transformed *Europeans* into tough, inventive, and self-reliant *Americans*.

Turner’s thesis raised a question that Americans found especially intriguing in 1893. Just three years earlier, the superintendent of the census declared that the frontier, defined as a zone with little or no settled population, had closed forever. What new forces, Turner now asked, would shape a distinctive American national character, now that the testing ground of the frontier had been plowed and tamed?

Turner’s hypothesis that the American character was forged in the western wilderness is surely among the most provocative statements ever made about the formative influences on the nation’s development. But as the frontier era recedes ever further into the past, scholars are less persuaded that Turner’s thesis adequately explains the national character. American society is still conspicuously different from European and other cultures, even though Turner’s frontier disappeared more than a century ago.

Modern scholars charge that Turner based his thesis on several questionable assumptions. Historian David J. Weber, for example, suggests that the line of the frontier did not define the quivering edge of “civilization” but marked the boundary between diverse cultures, each with its own claims to legitimacy and, indeed, to legitimate possession of the land. The frontier should therefore be understood not as the place where “civilization” triumphed over

“savagery,” but as the principal site of interaction between those cultures.

Several so-called New Western historians take this argument still further. Scholars such as Patricia Nelson Limerick, Richard White, and Donald Worster suggest that the cultural and ecological damage inflicted by advancing “civilization” must be reckoned with in any final accounting of what the pioneers accomplished. These same scholars insist that the West did not lose its regional identity after the frontier line was no longer recognizable in 1890. The West, they argue, is still a unique part of the national mosaic, a region whose history, culture, and identity remain every bit as distinctive as those of New England or the Old South.

But where Turner saw the frontier as the principal shaper of the region’s character, the New Western historians emphasize the effects of ethnic and racial confrontation, topography, climate, and the roles of government and big business as the factors that have made the modern West. The New Western historians thus reject Turner’s emphasis on the triumphal civilizing of the wilderness. As they see the matter, European and American settlers did not tame the West, but rather conquered it, by suppressing the Native American and Hispanic peoples who had preceded them into the region. But those conquests were less than complete, so the argument goes, and the West therefore remains, uniquely among American regions, an unsettled arena of commingling and competition among those groups. Moreover, in these accounts the West’s distinctively challenging climate and geography yielded to human habitation not through the efforts of heroic individual pioneers, but only through massive corporate—and especially federal government—investments in transportation systems (like the transcontinental railroad) and irrigation projects (like the watering of California’s Central Valley). Such developments still give western life its special character today.

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Why Did America Become a World Power?

American imperialism has long been an embarrassing topic for students of American history, who remember the Republic's own revolutionary origins and anticolonial tradition. Perhaps for that reason, many historians have tried to explain the dramatic overseas expansionism of the 1890s as some kind of aberration—a sudden, singular, and short-lived departure from time-honored American principles and practices. Various explanations have been offered to account for this spasmodic lapse. Scholars such as Julius Pratt pointed to the irresponsible behavior of the yellow press. Richard Hofstadter ascribed America's imperial fling to the “psychic crisis of the 1890s,” a crisis brought on, he argued, by the strains of the decade's economic depression and the Populist upheaval. Howard K. Beale emphasized the contagious scramble for imperial possessions by the European powers, as well as Japan, in these years.

In Beale's argument, the United States—and Theodore Roosevelt in particular—succumbed to a kind of international peer pressure: if other countries were expanding their international roles and even establishing colonies around the globe, could the United States safely refrain from doing the same? In Beale's view, Theodore Roosevelt was no simple-minded imperial swashbuckler, but a coolly calculating diplomatic realist who perceived that if the United States did not hold its own against other powers, it would soon risk being pushed around, even in its own hemisphere, despite the Monroe Doctrine.

Perhaps the most controversial interpretation of American imperialism has come from a so-called New Left school of writers, inspired by William Appleman Williams (and before him by V. I. Lenin's 1916 book *Imperialism: The Highest Stage of*

Capitalism). Historians such as Williams and Walter LaFeber argue that the explanation for political and military expansion abroad is to be found in economic expansion at home. Increasing industrial output, so the argument goes, required ever more raw materials and, especially, overseas markets. To meet those needs, the nation adopted a strategy of “informal empire,” shunning formal territorial possessions (with the conspicuous exceptions of Puerto Rico and the Philippines), but seeking economic dominance over foreign markets, materials, and investment outlets. That “revisionist” interpretation, in turn, has been sharply criticized by scholars who point out that foreign trade accounted for only a tiny share of American output and that the diplomacy of this period was far too complex to be reduced to “economic need.”

Most recently, historians have highlighted the importance of race and gender in the march toward empire. Roosevelt and other imperialists perceived their world in gendered terms. American society, many feared, was losing touch with the manly virtues. It had grown soft and “feminine” since the closing of the frontier. Imperialists also saw the nations of the world in a strict racial hierarchy, with “primitive” blacks and Indians at the bottom and “civilized” Anglo-Saxons at the top. In this world-view the conquest of “inferior” peoples seemed natural—a tropical tonic to restore the nation's masculine virility. Scholars who emphasize these explanations of imperialism are less likely to see the expansionism of the 1890s as an aberration in American history. Instead, they argue, these overseas adventures were part of a long tradition of race-fueled militarism, from the nation's earliest Indian wars to Cold War engagements in Korea and Vietnam.

VARYING VIEWPOINTS

How Radical Was the New Deal?

The Great Depression was both a great calamity and a great opportunity. How effectively Franklin Roosevelt responded to the calamity and what use he made of the opportunity are the two great questions that have animated historical debate about the New Deal.

Some historians have actually denied that there was much of a connection between the depression and the New Deal. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., for example, who believes in “cycles” of reform and reaction in American history, has written that “there would very likely have been some sort of New Deal in the 1930s even without the Depression.” But most of the first generation of historians who wrote about the New Deal (in the 1940s, 1950s, and early 1960s) agreed with Carl Degler’s judgment that the New Deal was “a revolutionary response to a revolutionary situation.” In this view, though Roosevelt never found a means short of war to bring about economic recovery, he shrewdly utilized the stubborn economic crisis as a means to enact sweeping reforms. A handful of scholars, notably Edgar Eugene Robinson, condemned Roosevelt’s record as a “socialistic” break with American traditions. But until the 1960s, the great majority of historians approved the political values of the new Deal and praised its accomplishments.

Some leftist scholars writing in the 1960s, however, notably Barton J. Bernstein, charged that the New Deal did not reach far enough. This criticism echoed the socialist complaint in the 1930s that the depression represented the total collapse of American capitalism, and that the New Deal had muffled the chance truly to remake American society. Roosevelt had the chance, these historians argue, to redistribute wealth, improve race relations, and bring the giant corporations to heel. Instead, say these critics, the New Deal simply represented a conservative holding action to shore up a sagging and corrupt capitalist order.

Those charges against the New Deal stimulated another generation of scholars in the 1970s, 1980s, and 1990s to look closely at the concrete institutional, attitudinal, and economic circumstances in which the New Deal unfolded. Historians such as James Patterson, Alan Brinkley, Kenneth Jackson, Harvard Sitkoff, and Elizabeth Cohen—sometimes loosely referred to as the “constraints school”—conclude that the New Deal offered just about as much reform as circumstances allowed and as the majority of Americans wanted. The findings of these historians are impressive: the system of checks and balances limited presidential power; the disproportionate influence of southern Democrats in Congress stalled attempts to move toward racial justice; the federal system, in fact, inhibited all efforts to initiate change from Washington. Most important, a majority of the American people at the time wanted to reform capitalism, not overthrow it. Industrial workers, for example, were not hapless pawns upon whom the New Deal was foisted, frustrating their yearning for more radical change. Instead they sought security and self-determination in ways quite compatible with the New Deal’s programs for unemployment insurance, old-age pensions, and guarantees of labor’s right to organize.

The best proof of the soundness of that conclusion is probably the durability of the political alliance that Roosevelt assembled. The great “New Deal coalition” that dominated American politics for nearly four decades after Roosevelt’s election in 1932 represented a broad consensus in American society about the legitimate limits of government efforts to shape the social and economic order. William Leuchtenburg has offered the most balanced historical assessment in his description of the New Deal as a “half-way revolution,” neither radical nor conservative, but accurately reflecting the American people’s needs and desires in the 1930s—and for a long time thereafter.

Chronology

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| <p>1941 United States declares war on Japan
Germany declares war on United States
Randolph plans black march on Washington
Fair Employment Practices Commission (FEPC) established</p> <p>1942 Japanese Americans sent to internment camps
Japan conquers the Philippines
Battle of the Coral Sea
Battle of Midway
United States invades North Africa
Congress of Racial Equality (CORE) founded</p> <p>1943 Allies hold Casablanca conference
Allies invade Italy
Smith-Connally Anti-Strike Act
"Zoot-suit" riots in Los Angeles
Race riot in Detroit</p> | <p>1943 Japanese driven from Guadalcanal
Teheran conference</p> <p>1944 <i>Korematsu v. U.S.</i>
D-Day invasion of France
Battle of Marianas
Roosevelt defeats Dewey for presidency</p> <p>1944–</p> <p>1945 Battle of the Bulge</p> <p>1945 Roosevelt dies; Truman assumes presidency
Germany surrenders
Battles of Iwo Jima and Okinawa
Potsdam conference
Atomic bombs dropped on Hiroshima and Nagasaki
Japan surrenders</p> |
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The Atomic Bombs: Were They Justified?

No episode of the World War II era has provoked sharper controversy than the atomic bombings of Japan in August 1945. Lingered moral misgivings about the nuclear incineration of Hiroshima and Nagasaki have long threatened to tarnish America's crown of military victory. Some critics have accused the United States of racist motives because the bombs were dropped on a nonwhite people. Other commentators note that the Japanese were already reeling on the verge of collapse by 1945, and therefore history's most awful weapons—especially the second bomb, on Nagasaki—were unnecessary to bring the war to a conclusion. Still other scholars, notably Gar Alperovitz, have further charged that the atomic attacks on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were not the last shots of World War II, but the first salvos in the emerging Cold War. Alperovitz argues that President Truman willfully ignored Tokyo's attempts to negotiate a surrender in the summer of 1945 and rejected all alternatives to dropping the bomb because he wanted

to intimidate and isolate the Soviet Union. He unleashed his horrible new weapons, so this argument goes, not simply to defeat Japan, but to end the Far Eastern conflict before the Soviets could enter it, and thereby freeze them out of any role in formulating postwar reconstruction policy in Asia.

Each of these accusations has been vigorously rebutted. Richard Rhodes's exhaustive history of the making of the atomic bomb emphasizes that the Anglo-American atomic project began as a race against the Germans, who were known to be actively pursuing a nuclear weapons program. (Unknown to the Americans, Germany effectively terminated its effort in 1942, just as the Anglo-American project went into high gear.) From the outset both British and American planners believed that the bomb, if successful, would be not just another weapon, but *the* ultimate instrument of destruction that would decisively deliver victory into the hands of whomever possessed it. They consequently assumed that it

would be used at the earliest possible moment. There is, therefore, no credible reason to conclude that German cities would not have suffered the fate of Hiroshima and Nagasaki if nuclear weapons had become available sooner or if the European phase of the war had lasted longer.

It is true that American intelligence sources in the early summer of 1945 reported that some Japanese statesmen were trying to enlist the still-neutral Russians' good offices to negotiate a surrender. But as R. J. C. Butow's fine-grained study of Japan's decision to surrender demonstrates, it was unclear whether those initiatives had the full backing of the Japanese government. Moreover, the Japanese clung to several unacceptable conditions, including protection for their imperial system of government, the right to disarm and repatriate their own troops, no military occupation of the home islands, no international trials of alleged war criminals, and possible retention of some of their conquered territories. All this flew squarely in the face of America's repeatedly declared intention to settle for nothing less than *unconditional* surrender. As for the Nagasaki bomb (dropped on August 9), Butow also notes that it conclusively dispelled the Japanese government's original assessment that the Hiroshima attack (on August 6) was a one-time-only stunt, with little likelihood of further nuclear strikes to follow. (Even then, some diehard military officers, refusing to acknowledge defeat, tried, on the night of August 14, to storm the Imperial Palace to seize the recording of the emperor's surrender announcement before it could be broadcast the following day.)

Could the use of the atomic bombs have been avoided? Studies by Martin J. Sherwin, Barton J.

Bernstein, and McGeorge Bundy have shown that few policymakers at the time seriously asked that question. As Winston Churchill later wrote, "The decision whether or not to use the atomic bomb to compel the surrender of Japan was never even an issue. There was unanimous, automatic, unquestioned agreement around our table; nor did I ever hear the slightest suggestion that we should do otherwise." In fact, the "decision" to use the bomb was not made in 1945, but in 1942, when the United States committed itself to a crash program to build—and use—a nuclear weapon as swiftly as possible. Intimidating the Soviets might have been a "bonus" to using the bomb against Japan, but influencing Soviet behavior was never the *primary* reason for the fateful decision. American leaders wanted to end the war as soon as possible. To that end they had always assumed the atomic bomb would be dropped as soon as it was available. That moment came on August 6, 1945.

Doubt and remorse about the atomic conclusion of World War II have plagued the American conscience ever since. Less often remarked on are the deaths of four times more Japanese noncombatants than died at Hiroshima and Nagasaki in the so-called conventional fire-bombing of some five dozen Japanese cities in 1945. Those deaths suggest that the deeper moral question should perhaps be addressed not to the particular technology of nuclear weaponry and the fate of those two unfortunate Japanese cities, but to the quite deliberate decision, made by several combatants—including the Germans, the British, the Americans, and the Japanese themselves—to designate civilian populations as legitimate military targets.

Chronology

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| <p>1944 Servicemen's Readjustment Act (GI Bill)
Bretton Woods economic conference</p> <p>1945 Spock publishes <i>The Common Sense Book of Baby and Child Care</i>
Yalta conference
United States ends lend-lease to USSR
United Nations established</p> <p>1945-</p> <p>1946 Nuremberg war crimes trials in Germany</p> <p>1946 Employment Act creates Council of Economic Advisers
Iran crisis
Kennan's "Long Telegram" lays out "Containment Doctrine."</p> <p>1946-</p> <p>1948 Tokyo war crimes trials</p> <p>1947 Truman Doctrine
Marshall Plan
Taft-Hartley Act
National Security Act creates Department of Defense, National Security Council (NSC), and Central Intelligence Agency (CIA)</p> | <p>1948 United States officially recognizes Israel
"Voice of America" begins radio broadcasts behind iron curtain
Hiss case begins
Truman defeats Dewey for presidency</p> <p>1948-</p> <p>1949 Berlin crisis</p> <p>1949 NATO established
Communists defeat Nationalists in China</p> <p>1950 American economy begins postwar growth
McCarthy red hunt begins
McCarran Internal Security Bill passed by Congress over Truman's veto</p> <p>1950-</p> <p>1953 Korean War</p> <p>1951 Truman fires MacArthur
Rosenbergs convicted of treason</p> <p>1952 United States explodes first hydrogen bomb</p> <p>1957 Postwar peak of U.S. birthrate</p> <p>1973 U.S. birthrate falls below replacement level</p> |
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VARYING VIEWPOINTS

Who Was to Blame for the Cold War?

Whose fault was the Cold War? (And, for that matter, who should get credit for ending it?) For two decades after World War II, American historians generally agreed that the aggressive Soviets were solely responsible. This "orthodox" or "official" appraisal squared with the traditional view of the United States as a virtuous, innocent land with an idealistic foreign policy. This point of view also justified America's Cold War containment policy, which cast the Soviet Union as the aggressor that must be confined by an ever-vigilant United States. America supposedly had only

defensive intentions, with no expansionary ambitions of its own.

In the 1960s a vigorous revisionist interpretation flowered, powerfully influenced by disillusion over U.S. involvement in Vietnam. The revisionists stood the orthodox view on its head. The Soviets, they argued, had only defensive intentions at the end of World War II; it was the Americans who had behaved provocatively by brandishing their new atomic weaponry. Some of these critics pointed an accusing finger at President Truman, alleging that he aban-

doned Roosevelt's conciliatory approach to the Soviets and adopted a bullying attitude, emboldened by the American atomic monopoly.

More radical revisionists like Gabriel and Joyce Kolko even claimed to have found the roots of Truman's alleged belligerence in long-standing American policies of economic imperialism—policies that eventually resulted in the tragedy of Vietnam (see pp. 928–930). In this view the Vietnam War followed logically from America's insatiable “need” for overseas markets and raw materials. Vietnam itself may have been economically unimportant, but, so the argument ran, a communist Vietnam represented an intolerable challenge to American hegemony. Ironically, revisionists thus endorsed the so-called domino theory, which official apologists often cited in defense of America's Vietnam policy. According to the domino theory, if the United States declined to fight in Vietnam, other countries would lose their faith in America's will (or their fear of American power) and would tumble one after the other like “dominoes” into the Soviet camp. Revisionists stressed what they saw as the *economic necessity* behind the domino theory: losing in Vietnam, they claimed, would unravel the American economy.

In the 1970s a “postrevisionist” interpretation emerged that is widely agreed upon today. Historians such as John Lewis Gaddis and Melvyn Leffler pooh-pooh the economic determinism of the revisionists, while frankly acknowledging that the United States did have vital security interests at stake in the post-World War II era. The postrevisionists analyze the ways in which inherited ideas (like isolationism) and the contentious nature of postwar domestic pol-

itics, as well as miscalculations by American leaders, led a nation in search of security into seeking not simply a sufficiency but a “preponderance” of power. The American *overreaction* to its security needs, these scholars suggest, exacerbated U.S.-Soviet relations and precipitated the four-decade-long nuclear arms race that formed the centerpiece of the Cold War.

In the case of Vietnam, the postrevisionist historians focus not on economic necessity, but on a failure of political intelligence, induced by the stressful conditions of the Cold War, that made the dubious domino theory seem plausible. Misunderstanding Vietnamese intentions, exaggerating Soviet ambitions, and fearing to appear “soft on communism” in the eyes of their domestic political rivals, American leaders plunged into Vietnam, sadly misguided by their own Cold War obsessions.

Most postrevisionists, however, still lay the lion's share of the blame for the Cold War on the Soviet Union. By the same token, they credit the Soviets with ending the Cold War—a view hotly disputed by Ronald Reagan's champions, who claim that it was his anti-Soviet policies in the 1980s that brought the Russians to their knees (see pp. 973–974). The great unknown, of course, is the precise nature of Soviet thinking in the Cold War years. Were Soviet aims predominantly defensive, or did the Kremlin incessantly plot world conquest? Was there an opportunity for reconciliation with the West following Stalin's death in 1953? Should Mikhail Gorbachev or Ronald Reagan be remembered as the leader who ended the Cold War? With the opening of Soviet archives, scholars are eagerly pursuing answers to such questions.